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## FRIEZE vs FIAC

- ▶ RAMIN SALSALI DUBAI ART PATRON
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# FRANCIS BACON IN MONTE CARLO

THE FRANCIS BACON FOUNDATION,  
VILLA ÉLISE, MONACO



During his lifetime, Francis Bacon (1909-92), known for his bold, graphic and emotionally raw and sometimes savage imagery, was equally reviled and acclaimed. Margaret Thatcher, not of course known as an art connoisseur, described him as “that man who paints those dreadful pictures”.

Since his death, his reputation and market value has grown exponentially. Today he is regarded as one of the most compelling and controversial British figurative artists and one of the giants of the 20th century. In 2013, Bacon's *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* was sold for over \$142 million, making it the most expensive painting ever sold.

Despite Bacon's immense fame and popularity, many are unaware of the details of his colourful life, filled with ambiguity and contradictions. He was born in 1909 in Dublin, into a wealthy family with historic and aristocratic connections - it is also thought that he is descended from the illustrious 17th century English philosopher and essayist with the same name, Francis Bacon.

Expelled from school, Bacon had little formal education or art training. Rejected by his very conservative father because of his contempt for social norms and flamboyant sexual preferences, he led an itinerant life mainly in London, surviving thanks to a small trust fund, rent-dodging, petty theft, running illicit gambling dens, work at a call centre and renting out his services as a gentleman's companion etc. Surprisingly, the only 'proper' job he had was as an interior designer and designer of furniture and rugs. He also painted from time to time, but without great success. It was only in 1944, when aged 35, having produced what he considered his

first good painting, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (now in Tate Britain), that he decided to become a full-time artist.

Bacon loved drinking, gambling and low-life but he also had a taste for good restaurants and good hotels. In 1946, saddled with debt, he was delighted when the young and very perspicacious art dealer Erica Brausen bought his *Painting* (1946) for \$550 - a small fortune at the time. (She sold it two years later to the Museum of Modern Art, New York). Within a fortnight of the sale, Bacon used the proceeds to decamp from London to Monte Carlo.

“I have found a villa with what I hope will be a wonderful room to work in,” Bacon wrote, to Brausen. “There are plenty of rooms and bathrooms so do come and stay if you feel like it at any time ... It's wonderful here, terribly expensive, and the days hot and trembling like the middle of summer.”

Bacon became a great friend of Brausen, who, he said, had the best eye in the business. She founded the immensely influential Hanover Gallery in London. She was devastated when in 1958 Bacon suddenly left her gallery to join the Marlborough Gallery - he said that it was only because they were prepared to advance him funds to pay off his debts. That was the end of their relationship. However, when, many years later, he was told that she was ill and needed medical attention, with typical generosity, he immediately sent her \$150,000.

Bacon loved Monte Carlo. He was no doubt inspired by the light, landscape and food of Monaco and the Côte d'Azur - as well as the Principality's bars and gambling dens. The

*Interior view of the Foundation, showing a 1960 photograph of Bacon in his studio © Copyright Sotheby's/The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive. Courtesy MB Art Collection*



casino proved a very useful source of funds on occasion – and a source of losses too. He lived in Monaco until the early 1950s and returned regularly throughout his life.

It is therefore appropriate that a new institution, the Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation, has just opened (on 28 October) at the Villa Élise in Monte Carlo, inaugurated by Prince Albert of Monaco. The opening of the non-profit organization marked the anniversary of Bacon's birth on 28 October 1909.

The foundation is the brainchild of Lebanese-Swiss property developer, Majid Boustany. It houses his collection of over 2,000 Bacon-related items including artworks, photographs, works on paper and working documents, as well as examples of the artist's furniture and rug designs, many of which are on public view for the first time.

Boustany first fell for Bacon when he encountered his enigmatic triptych, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) at Tate Britain, while studying in London. "I was shocked by the profoundly disturbing half-human, half-animal organic forms, but, strangely enough, I felt utterly fascinated by these menacing creatures, surrounded by vivid cadmium orange. "My fascination with the oeuvre of this uncompromising artist, who described the images he created as a 'concentration of reality', has grown constantly over the last 20 years."

The philanthropist, who has been a Monaco resident for the last 30 years, developed a particular interest for Bacon's little-known Monegasque (Monaco) period.

As Boustany points out, there is still much to discover about the impact Monaco had on the artist's pictorial production. This is one of the areas the foundation is concentrating on. And the findings are potentially very rich. "We've discovered that Bacon started painting on the back (unprimed) side of the canvas – as he was short of funds after losing all of his money in the Casino here, and this became one of the trademarks of his style!" said Boustany. "Also, it was in Monaco that Bacon really began to concentrate on painting the human form, a crucial step that would lead him later in his life to become one of the greatest figurative British postwar artists."

The Francis Bacon Foundation will operate in close collaboration with the Francis Bacon Estate. Bacon scholar, Martin Harrison, who is currently editing the artist's catalogue raisonné for the estate, sits on the foundation's board. But it took some convincing, not least as there are so many Bacon forgeries and cranks around. Harrison noted: Boustany seemed too good to be true. Everyone was a bit sceptical. They checked Boustany out. His family are philanthropists and they give scholarships in business studies to Harvard and Cambridge each year. Everything checked out. He spends about 24 hours a day working on Bacon!"

The foundation occupies the ground floor of the 19th century Villa Elise, a relatively intimate space, chosen in light of the artist's remark, after his legendary 1977 show at the Galerie Claude Bernard in Paris, that he preferred to have his work shown in a small space, where his paintings seemed "more intense."

The foundation will organize exhibitions, in partnership with other institutions, and fund research, as well as continuing to acquire material for the collection. There will be an



*Francis Bacon:  
Three Studies  
for Figures at  
the Base of  
a Crucifixion  
(1944), oil and  
pastel on board  
© Tate. Courtesy  
Tate, London*

extensive library open to scholars and members of the public by appointment. Forthcoming plans include a major show on Bacon, Monaco and the Côte d'Azur. Boustany says he has built up a team have built a team of photographers, art historians, curators, restorers and even a 'detective'.

Boustany is not particularly worried by the astronomical prices being fetched for Bacon's paintings. "We already have the biggest private collection in the world," he said, "but our interest is really in items that will be of use in research, rather than the pricier end of the market that involves record-breaking oil paintings."

Known traditionally as a city of celebs, tax exiles, cars, casinos and yachts, Monte Carlo is in fact undergoing something of a cultural renaissance, with its new national museum and programme of contemporary art exhibitions. The new Francis Bacon MB Foundation will be a welcome addition to its cultural credentials.

The foundation is open year-round to scholars and art historians but to the general public only by appointment and from March 2015.



*Interior view of  
the Foundation,  
showing Bacon's  
easel and a 1977  
photograph of the  
artist in his studio  
in Reece Mews,  
South Kensington,  
London, by Carlos  
Freire. Courtesy  
Francis Bacon MB  
Art Foundation*